

## The Feith Buidhe disaster

At 7.25 pm on Sunday, 21 November 1971, it was reported at Aviemore Police Station that a party of six schoolchildren plus an instructress and a trainee instructress had failed to return from an overnight expedition in the Cairngorms. This was the first intimation of the Feith Buidhe Disaster – the worst disaster in Scottish Mountaineering history, in which five teenage schoolchildren and the trainee instructress died, and the two survivors, badly exposed and frostbitten, were saved by a very narrow margin.

Those in the disaster party were as follows:

Catherine Jane Davidson (20), Student Physical Education Teacher – survived.

Raymond Oliver Leslie (15), Schoolboy – survived.

Sheelagh Elaine Sunderland (18), Student – died.

Carol Elizabeth Bertram (16), Schoolgirl – died.

Diane Dudgeon (15), Schoolgirl – died.

Lorraine Margaret Dick (15), Schoolgirl – died.

Susan Byrne (15), Schoolgirl – died.

William James Kerr (15), Schoolboy – died.

About 10 pm on Friday, 19 November a party of fourteen schoolchildren from Ainslie Park School, Edinburgh, in the charge of William Beattie (23), an Instructor of Outdoor Education, and accompanied by Catherine Jane Davidson, and Sheelagh Elaine Sunderland, arrived at Lagganlia Centre for Outdoor Education, Kincaig. Lagganlia is an outdoor centre administered by Edinburgh Education Authority, with a resident Principal, Mr John Paisley (39). Miss Davidson, Beattie's girl friend, was there in the capacity of an instructress, and Miss Sunderland, whose first visit this was to the Cairngorms, was to be working at Lagganlia Centre as a Voluntary Instructress for three weeks.

The purpose of the visit by the Ainslie Park School party to Lagganlia was to practice navigation and emergency bivouac techniques on the Saturday and the Sunday, but on arrival at Lagganlia the bivouac plan was changed to spending the Saturday night in Corrour Bothy. The planned route was as follows:

Outward      Cairngorm Car Park – Fiacail a' Choire Chais – Cairngorm – Lochan Buidhe – Ben Macdhuì – Allt Clach nan Taillear – Lairig Ghru – Corrour Bothy.

Alternative      Bivouac at Curran Bothy at Lochan Buidhe.



Inward Corrour Bothy – Cairn Toul – Braeriach – Sron na Lairig – Coire Gorm – Sinclair Hut, Rothiemurchus.

Alternative Lairig Ghru – Sinclair Hut.

The party was to be split up into two groups, the older and stronger group under Beattie, and the younger and weaker group under Davidson, with Sunderland accompanying the second group, partly to assist, but mainly to gain experience.

On the Saturday morning the combined party left Lagganlia between 10.30 am and 11 am and drove to Cairngorm car park. At this time there was snow on the ground, and the forecast was of deteriorating weather, with snow.

At the car park, the plans were modified, and both groups took the chair lift to the top station, going to the Ptarmigan Restaurant, where they ate their lunch. Beattie, with eight children left about 20 minutes before Davidson and Sunderland with six children.

Beattie's party had a fairly uneventful walk to Curran, but were faced from Coire Domhain on with increasing wind and lessening visibility, forcing them to navigate by line bearings. They arrived at Curran bothy about 3.30 pm, having decided to implement the bad weather alternative plan and stay there overnight. When the second party did not arrive, they assumed that Davidson had gone to the St Valery refuge or to Jean's Hut, as these had apparently been mentioned earlier. They were not worried about their non-appearance, and spent what must have been a cold and uncomfortable night in the bothy.

When Davidson's party left the Ptarmigan Restaurant, they climbed Cairngorm, and left the summit for Curran, according to a Glenmore Lodge Instructor who was working at the radio station there, at about 1.20 pm. They encountered bad conditions in Coire Domhain, with knee-deep snow and a strong SSE wind. In the Feith Buidhe basin the snow conditions were worse, and Davidson took the party to the Feith Buidhe stream, hoping to follow it up to the Lochan Buidhe and so to Curran Bothy. This proved to be impossible, as the stream was completely covered over by snow, and as dusk was rapidly approaching, Davidson decided to bivouac where she was rather than to risk tiring out her party in a possibly vain attempt to find the Curran Bothy. The snow was floury, and useless for snow holing, and they eventually lay down behind a makeshift wall of snow. They removed most of their wet clothing and got into their poly bags and sleeping bags.

During the Saturday night, the weather worsened and the party started to become buried by drifting snow. Some of them panicked,





Feith Buidhe flats, looking towards Cairn Gorm. The bivouac site is in the centre, at the stream. It is indicated by a cross.

[*photo by A. Watson*]



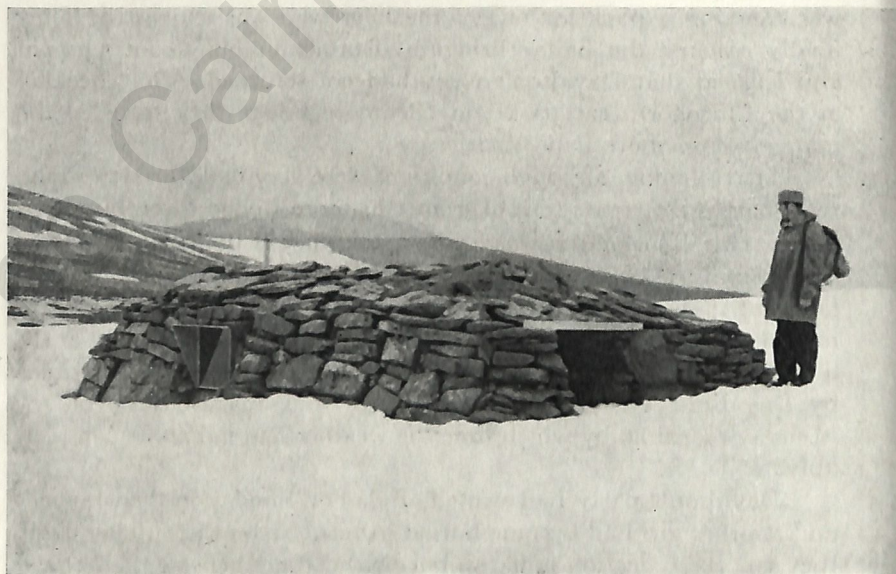
A view from near the top of Cairn Gorm in mid summer, looking south west past the cliffs of Coire an t'Sneachda towards Cairn Toul. The large snowfield on the plateau is at the head of the Feith Buidhe and immediately upstream from the bivouac site.

[*photo by A. Watson*]



The Curran Bothy covered by about 7 feet of snow in early March 1972. Only the ventilator is visible.

[*photo by D. Grieve*]



The Curran Bothy in early June 1972, still with about 4 feet of snow. It was not possible to open the door till midsummer day.

[*photo by J. Duff*]



and Davidson did her best to dig them out, losing her mitts in the process. At first light on the Sunday, Raymond Leslie was completely buried but could still be heard, and two of the girls were lying on the surface, out of both their sleeping bags and poly bags. Another girl was described as being 'in a bit of a daze'. It seems likely that these three girls were already dying of cold.

Davidson got the two uncovered girls back into sleeping bags, and, along with William Kerr, who appears at this stage to have been still quite strong, tried to go for help. This effort was abandoned, however, after about 25 yards, because of thigh-deep snow and strong wind. They returned to the bivouac and waited, hoping that the weather would improve.

On the Sunday morning, Beattie's party, still assuming that Davidson was at St Valery or Jean's Hut, found the weather considerably worse. They had difficulty in getting out of the Curran Bothy because of the door being jammed shut with snow. They descended the March Burn to Lairig Ghru, the descent involving a commando abseil during which one boy slipped and almost fell. Beattie had to fit crampons to the children's feet, and one boy cried because he was scared. In Lairig Ghru conditions were still very bad, and it was not till about 3 pm that they reached the Sinclair Hut. By this time Beattie was carrying a pack for one of the boys who was exhausted. They finally reached the Bailey Bridge at Rothiemurchus about 5.30 pm and learned that Davidson's party had not returned. After checking at the Cairngorm car park and Glenmore Lodge they reported the matter at Aviemore Police Station.

That evening, although conditions were very bad, three two-man reconnaissance parties set out from Glenmore Lodge to probe-search likely areas. This search was fruitless, and in fact the conditions were so bad that the parties completely failed to find the St Valery refuge, and had to search for the Shelter Stone. One party returned to Glenmore Lodge, and the other two spent the remainder of the night at the Shelter Stone. The reflection of flares set off by these parties was seen by Davidson. The search was resumed on a massive scale on the Monday morning, by which time the weather had improved considerably.

Davidson's party had waited all day on Sunday in their bivouac and another girl had become buried. After dark on the Sunday night, they saw the reflection of flares, but by this time their own mini flares were lost and they could not reply. The party was now in dire straits, and probably some were already dead.



At daybreak on the Monday, Davidson and Kerr again tried to go for help, but the boy was too weak and collapsed. Davidson was found by helicopter at 10.30 am. She was close to total collapse, and was unable to give the position of the rest of the party.

About 12.30 pm the position of the buried party was established and between then and 1.30 pm all the buried children were found. The last to be found was Raymond Leslie, who was still alive although unconscious and badly frostbitten. He was buried under four feet of level snow. He was flown by helicopter to Raigmore Hospital and subsequently recovered.

By the time all of the party had been found and the survivor evacuated, it was too late in the day to start evacuation of the bodies, so that it was the Tuesday before they were finally flown off the hill. All of the flying was carried out in extremely marginal conditions.

A Fatal Accident Inquiry was held in Banff in February 1972, and it lasted for six days. The jury returned a formal verdict and did not allocate blame, but made the following recommendations:

The Jury state that they would not discourage the spirit of adventure in outdoor activities with children, but they suggest the following recommendations from the evidence before the Inquiry:

1. That more care be exercised in the organising of parties of young children in outdoor activities with special regard to fitness and training.
2. That fuller information regarding outdoor activities should be given to parents and acknowledged by them.
3. That certified teachers should accompany their pupils to outdoor centres such as Lagganlia and that expeditions should be led thereafter by fully qualified and long experienced instructors in their own field. This includes references to weather forecasts and local conditions.
4. That certain areas of the countryside be designated as suitable for children's expeditions in summer and winter. These areas to be decided after consideration with the Scottish Mountain Leadership Board, Mountain Rescue Organisations and local knowledge.
5. In the matter of high level bothies, advice as to their removal or otherwise should be left to the experts.
6. That they endorse what the Court said in praise of Mountain Rescue Operations and suggest that thought might be given to furthering the good work done by them, financially and otherwise.
7. In the event of a disaster closer liaison should be kept between authorities and parents concerned.



*Editorial Post Script*

Arising out of item 5 above, the following important notice has been widely displayed and publicised, although, due to certain objections being raised, the removal of the bothies has been delayed. It seems likely, however, that the notice will still be valid, as the bothies will very probably have been removed by the end of this summer.

**IMPORTANT NOTICE**

**HIGH LEVEL BOTHIES**

Following a decision made after the fullest possible consultation, the bothies known as:

**CURRAN** situated beside Lochan Buidhe at MR 983010  
**EL ALAMEIN** on North Ridge of Cairngorm at MR 016054  
and  
**ST VALERY** on the cliffs above the west end of Loch Avon at  
MR 002022

are to be removed on 2nd June 1973 or as soon as possible thereafter. It is most important that no plans be made involving the use of any of these three bothies after 2nd June 1973.

**TOM CHASSER**  
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Chief Constable  
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